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Amis launches scathing response to accusations of Islamophobia

By Jonathan Brown

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Martin Amis defended himself yesterday against allegations of Islamophobia, insisting it was necessary to "build all the bridges we can" with moderate Muslims, who he said constituted the majority within the faith.

Outlining his views in a letter to *The Independent* columnist Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, who on Monday wrote in an article that the author was "with the beasts" when it came to dealing with Islam, Amis denied the accusations, insisting the remarks from which she had drawn her conclusions had been "distorted" in an article written by his colleague Professor Terry Eagleton.

"It is a dull business, correcting Eagleton's distortions, but this is the work he is obliging me to do," wrote Amis in the letter, published below in full.

"The anti-Muslim measures he says I 'advocated' I merely adumbrated, not 'in an essay' ('he wrote', 'wrote Amis'— each of these is a little lie), but in a long interview with the press."

In the interview, Amis said: "The Muslim community will have to suffer until it gets its house in order. What sort of suffering? Not let them travel. Deportation – further down the road. Curtailing of freedoms. Strip-searching people who look like they're from the Middle East or from Pakistan... Discriminatory stuff, until it hurts the whole community and they start getting tough with their children..."

The remarks, originally published in August 2006, resurfaced this month when Eagleton, professor of English literature at Manchester University, where Amis has recently accepted a position teaching creative writing, used the interview as the basis for an article attacking Amis's alleged argument as a means of "hounding and humiliating [Muslims] as a whole [so] they would return home and teach their children to be obedient to the White Man's law". Eagleton, one of Britain's leading Marxist academics, concluded: "There seems something mildly defective about his logic."

The academic's disdain for Amis and his ideas had an earlier airing in a new introduction to his book *Ideology: An Introduction* in which he described the writer's father, Kingsley, as a "racist, anti-Semitic boor, a drink-sodden, self-hating reviler of women, gays and liberals" – adding: "Amis fils has clearly learnt more from him than how to turn a shapely phrase."

Amis's decision yesterday to write to Alibhai-Brown follows her intervention in the bitter academic spat in her weekly column. Under the headline "Expel the Muslim fanatics who want conflict", Alibhai-Brown recalled sharing a drink with the writer at last year's Cheltenham Festival – when, she said, on the face of it they should have agreed on ways of tackling Islamic terrorism in the UK. "He has pitched himself against demonic Muslims and is at war with them too," she wrote.

However, Alibhai-Brown said, having read the remarks quoted in Eagleton's essay, far from occupying common ground on the

issue, Amis was "with the beasts" when it came to dealing with Islam, with "the Muslim-baiters and haters, these days as likely to come from the Groucho and Garrick clubs as the nasty, secret venues used by neo-fascists." She said Amis was "another kind of threat to society".

THE LETTER...

Dear Yasmin,

Yes, I remember those drinks we had at the Cheltenham Festival last year – just the four of us, you and Mr Brown, me and Ms Fonseca. (You enjoyed a Ribena, as I recall, while I addressed myself to a powerful scotch.) That night you revealed, *inter alia*, that you were Shia; and, as far as I understand it, the Shia minority speaks for the more dreamy and poetic face of Islam, the more lax and capacious (tolerant, for example, of representations of the human form), the more spiritual (in the general sense of that word), as opposed to the Sunnis, whose approach is known to be stricter and more legalistic. Your Shia identity endeared you to me, and made me feel protective, because Islamism, in most of its manifestations, not only wants to kill me – it wants to kill you.

When you write that I am "with the beasts" on Islamic questions, it is because you've been listening, rather dreamily perhaps, to Professor Terry Eagleton. Now Eagleton, Yasmin, has a chair at Manchester University, where I have recently taken up an enjoyable post, and he is a man of a redundant but familiar type: an ideological relict, unable to get out of bed in the morning without the dual guidance of God and Karl Marx. More remarkably, he combines a cruising hostility with an almost neurotic indifference to truth; on the matter of checking his facts, he is, to be frank, an embarrassment to the academic profession. But his human need is simple enough: he wants attention to be paid to his self-righteousness – righteousness being his particular brand of vanity.

It is a dull business, correcting Eagleton's distortions, but this is the work he is obliging me to do. The anti-Muslim measures he says I "advocated" I merely adumbrated, not "in an essay" ("he wrote", "wrote Amis" – each of these is an untruth), but in a long interview with the press. It was a thought experiment, or a mood experiment, and the remarks were preceded by the following: "There's a definite urge – don't you have it? – to say... [etc, etc]." I felt that urge, for a day or two. My mood, I admit, was bleak – how I longed, Yasmin, for your soothing hand on my brow! It was, in its way, one of the bitterest moments, one of the moments of wormwood, in the strange tale that began five years earlier, in September 2001.

The press interview took place in the immediate aftermath of the foiled plot (August 2006) to obliterate 10 commercial jets with explosives put together in transit. Which would have resulted in the deaths of another 3,000 random Westerners, the majority of them women and children (these were summer flights across the North Atlantic). Human beings, born of women, caressed such thoughts in their minds.

There were two additional depressants. At least one of the alleged would-be mass murderers had taken the trouble to convert to Islam, suggesting that the exterminatory virus was about to mutate, like bird flu. And I'm sure you remember, Yasmin, that passengers on this route were suddenly forbidden to take books on the eight-hour flight – a resonant symbolic victory for the forces of ignorance, humourlessness, literalism, boredom and misery.

Anyway, the mood, the retaliatory "urge" soon evaporated, and I went back to feeling that we must, of course, build all the bridges we can between ourselves and the Muslim majority, which we know to be moderate. Moderate, and mute. The quietism is perhaps no mystery. In 15th-century Spain, not many people, I imagine, were proclaiming that the Inquisition had gone too far. The extremists, for now, have the monopoly of violence, intimidation, and self-righteousness. Meanwhile, I don't want to stripsearch you, Yasmin, or do anything else that would trouble or even momentarily surprise your dignity, or that of any other eirenic Muslim.

People like Eagleton are the nearest thing we have to the "iron mullahs": he is, in other words, a deluded flailer and stirrer. He recently did a similar job on my old mucker Sir Salman Rushdie; and the rigged-up spat ended with a helpless apology from Manchester. I don't know, or can't remember, how you felt about the knighthood. My father (also lazily and cornily defamed by Eagleton) said of his KBE: "It's not too little, but it is too late." An anachronistic award, perhaps – though one fully deserved by the author of the triumphant *Shalimar the Clown*. The "storm" that followed the announcement was unforeseen by everybody, including the Fourth Estate (which then hollered on about how "inevitable" it was). You see, time had advanced, in the West, since 1989. Time moves more slowly in Iran and Pakistan. As I don't need to tell you, Yasmin, there is something the matter with the Islamic clock.

You wrong your own intelligence when you write that atheism is another form of fanaticism. This notion is a philosophical non-starter. Adherence, however "moderate", to a holy book that recommends (for instance) the murder of apostates and the beating of women (on suspicion of disobedience) carries certain consequences. Whereas nothing follows from atheism. With atheism, there is no what-next.

I am off to Cheltenham tomorrow afternoon. And I hope to see you at the bar. With all best wishes to you and your husband,

Martin

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